

# Trump's Planned Troop Withdrawal From Germany Leaves Berlin Cold

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By Bojan Pancevski

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DISCOVER



**A military aircraft takes off from the U.S. air base in Ramstein, Germany.**

Photo: Boris Roessler/Zuma Press

BERLIN—When President Trump earlier this month said he would sharply reduce the number of U.S. troops stationed in Germany, he framed it as punishment for Berlin's low military spending. "Until they pay," Mr. Trump said, "we're removing our soldiers."

So far, Germany is unimpressed. Few politicians have commented on the move and military experts have said the punishment would mainly undermine the U.S. military's ability to conduct operations in Africa and the Middle East.

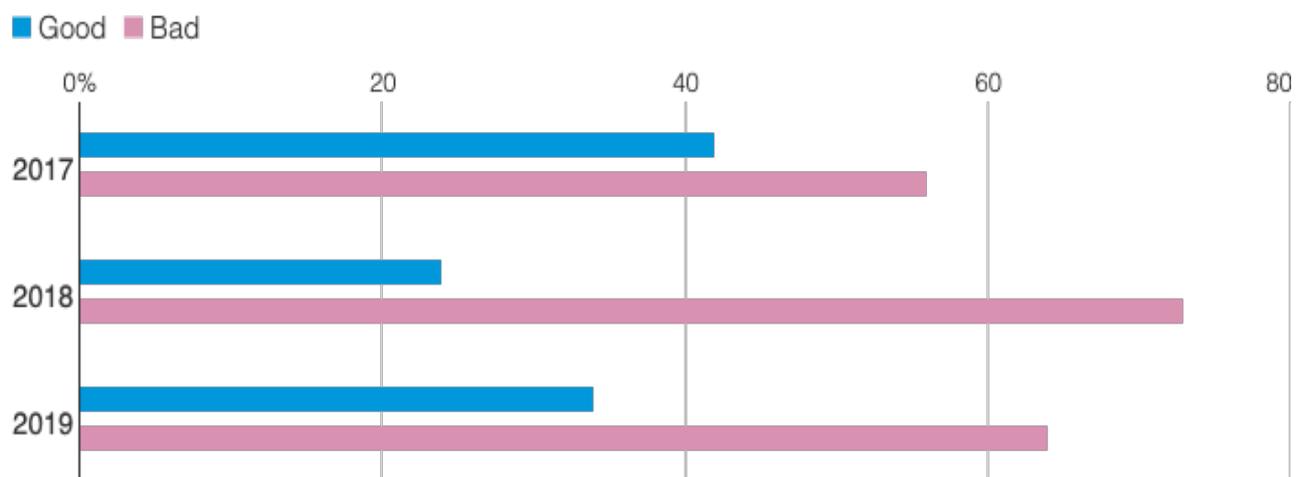
The reasons for the subdued response: a degree of resignation after years of criticism by Mr. Trump; ill feeling locally toward the U.S. military presence; and a general wait-and-see attitude ahead of this year's U.S. election.

On June 15, Mr. Trump said he would immediately pull out 9,500 troops from Germany and cap their number at 25,000 at any one time, half the current maximum.

The U.S. has more troops in Germany than in any other country in the world, except Japan. At the height of the Cold War, its deployment there numbered some 300,000 troops, serving as a deterrent against a Soviet invasion. Today, the number has dropped to 34,500, with some 17,000 civilians working together with the troops.

### Transatlantic Drift

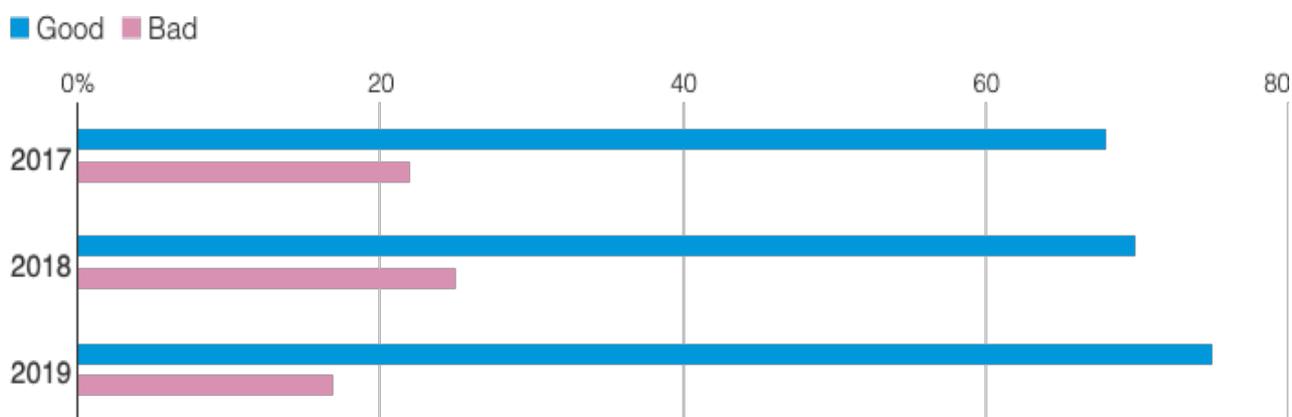
Percentage of people in Germany who say relations between the U.S. and Germany are:



## Percentage of people in the U.S. who say relations between the U.S. and Germany are:

Note: Excludes don't know responses

Sources: Pew Research Center survey conducted in the U.S. Sept. 17–22, 2019; German results from Körber-Stiftung survey conducted Sept. 9–28, 2019.



From Germany, the U.S. coordinates and commands its deployments across Europe, Africa and the Middle East, including drone operations in conflict zones. Germany also hosts the largest U.S. military hospital overseas.

Mr. Trump's decision came as a surprise. Neither the German government nor the North Atlantic Treaty Organization were notified in advance, according to senior officials, and even the U.S. Army command in Germany was caught unaware.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said on June 16 that American soldiers in Germany aren't only protecting the security of the host country, but also that of the U.S. and its European allies.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel herself has yet to react. After Richard Grenell, then U.S. ambassador to Germany, first floated the notion of a pullout last year, a senior German official said the chancellor would accept it and had little hope that relations with the U.S. administration would improve as long as Mr. Trump was in office.

But Mr. Trump's waning support in polls is fueling hope in Berlin that he might lose the coming election. German military experts doubt that the pullout can be organized before the election. Joe Biden, Mr. Trump's Democratic challenger, has said he

wouldn't remove troops from Germany if he were elected president in November.



**President Trump and first lady Melania Trump greeted members of the military at Ramstein Air Base in December 2018.**

Photo: Andrew Harnik/Associated Press

Reactions have been louder outside the government. Rolf Mützenich, a senior lawmaker in the center-left Social Democrats and a campaigner for disarmament, said it was increasingly hard to rely on the partnership with Mr. Trump because the president behaved like a “debt collector” for countries that spend less on defense.

Johann Wadephul, a conservative lawmaker and vocal trans-Atlanticist, said a pullout could damage NATO.

“This will weaken us all: The strategic setback is impossible to underestimate, but the political fallout is even greater,” Mr. Wadephul said. “Alliance partners must never punish each other, or else their adversaries will triumph.”

The announced withdrawal was making it harder for people like him who favor deeper ties with the U.S. to push back against growing anti-Americanism, he added. “NATO is an alliance of democracies who are bound together by common values, but now we talk about transactional relationships and punishment, which is maybe customary in the real-estate business but it is no basis for a trans-Atlantic alliance,” Mr. Wadephul said in reference to Mr. Trump’s past career as property developer.

A survey by the Pew Research Center published in March found that 64% of Germans thought relations between the two countries were bad.



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**NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg during a videoconference on June 17.**

Photo: Francois Lenoir/Associated Press

Erich Vad, a retired brigadier general and former military adviser to Ms. Merkel, said any pullout would undermine the U.S. more than Germany.

“This will have no real effects on the security of Germany; what the Americans have here is a hub that serves the logistical support of their presence in the region and beyond,” Mr. Vad said.

Longer term, however, he said withdrawing U.S. troops from Europe would signal to Russia and others that the U.S. was abdicating its leadership of NATO, in turn raising questions about its commitment to an accord under which Washington shares its nuclear deterrent with Berlin.

Such concerns aren’t limited to Germany. While Mr. Trump said this week he would relocate some forces to Poland, President Andrzej Duda pleaded with Mr. Trump to reconsider the German withdrawal, saying that pulling any U.S. forces from Europe would be “very detrimental to European security.”

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Trump administration officials, such as national security adviser Robert O’Brien and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have said the decision to withdraw military personnel

from Germany wasn't just punitive but also necessary so that more troops could be deployed in Asia given China's growing threat to the U.S.

"We're going to make sure we're postured appropriately to counter the People's Liberation Army [of China]," Mr. Pompeo said Thursday at a German Marshall Fund conference.

However, a strategic analysis by the Pentagon identifies Russia as a continued threat to Europe.

"This is a colossal mistake and not the result of strategic analysis, because no strategic analysis would conclude that our interest would be served if we removed a third of our capability in Europe," said Ben Hodges, who served as a commander of the U.S. Army in Europe until 2017.

**Write to** Bojan Pancevski at [bojan.pancevski@wsj.com](mailto:bojan.pancevski@wsj.com)

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